

# Using Creativity and Collaboration to Develop Innovative Programs That Embrace Diversity in Higher Education

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*This paper provides an example of an innovative solution to program development that addresses the diverse needs of teacher educators throughout various geographical locations in Florida, through a collaborative multi-university, multi-agency teacher training program funded by one collaborative grant. In this time of economic uncertainties, institutions of higher education must become creative and emphasize interdisciplinary collaborative efforts both internally and externally in order to develop cost-effective, innovative programs that embrace diversity. Innovation is driven out of need. My teaching experience, in the K-12 public school and in the university setting, fostered my awareness of the need for professional collaboration, and this awareness ignited my creativity. I will discuss how I identified the needs at my university and then utilized creativity and collaboration to network and obtain the grant, which then facilitated, developed, and taught in a new Masters of Education program in Arts and Academic Interdisciplinary Education. Program content and delivery were both planned around the diverse student population within the multi-university collaboration, with each university designing diverse programs to address the specific needs of their population but with the same concept of arts integration. Collaboration also occurred within each university: the College of Arts and Science and the College of Education. In addition, teachers were required to collaborate as coaches in their schools to train and support others in increasing arts integration in their schools.*

## Introduction

In this time of economic uncertainties, it is now more important than ever for institutions of

higher education to become creative and emphasize interdisciplinary collaborative efforts both internally and externally in order to develop cost-effective, innovative programs that embrace diversity. If

innovation is driven out of need, then institutions must tap into their creativity to become innovative in reaching diverse cultures. Collaboration facilitates creativity.

My teaching experience, in the K-12 public school and in the university setting, fostered my awareness of the need for professional collaboration. It is becoming increasingly important that pre-service teachers develop collaborative and cooperative skills (Novoa, 2004). Collaboration, among teachers, is a significant element of professional teacher communities. In order to effectively work with other professionals, parents, and students who are from diverse cultures, teachers must develop a posture of cultural reciprocity which facilitates a subtle cultural awareness (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

According to Delpit (1995), there are three levels of cultural awareness: overt, covert, and subtle. At the overt level, there is an awareness of obvious differences regarding language or manner of dress. Individuals who have developed a covert level of awareness recognize the invisible culture (Philips, 1983); parameters such as social status and interpersonal communicative styles. These cultural aspects require sustained contact or observation before becoming apparent. Finally, at the subtle level of cultural awareness there is recognition of imbedded values and beliefs that underlie the actions of a specific cultural group (Delpit, 1995). Furthermore, individuals at this level are aware that their beliefs and values influence their actions, and that these values, which were previously assumed to be universal, are in fact specific to the respective culture.

Dr. Beth Harry, from the University of Miami, established a theory entitled: Posture of Cultural Reciprocity. This theory demonstrates how to work effectively with culturally diverse parents of students with disabilities. Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) describe the five features of cultural reciprocity, which go beyond the awareness of noticing differences in others, to self-awareness. In addition, the Posture of Cultural Reciprocity theory aims for subtle levels of awareness of differences and has universal applicability. Applying the four progressive steps of cultural reciprocity can help both parents and professionals to avoid stereotyping and

feel empowered as they experience more successful collaborations.

To explain their theory, Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) created guidelines for cultural reciprocity, which they list as four progressive steps for a special education professional to take in order to develop a posture of cultural reciprocity. These steps effectively build bridges between a teacher's culturally diverse population of parents and students, and can be adapted to use in any setting to more effectively work in cultural diverse society. The steps include:

1. Identify the cultural values embedded in the professional interpretation of a student's difficulties or in the recommendation for services.
2. Find out if the family being served recognizes and values these assumptions, and if not, how their view differs from that of the professional.
3. Acknowledge and give explicit respect to any cultural differences identified, and fully explain the cultural basis of the professional assumptions.
4. Through discussion and collaboration, set about determining the most effective way to adapt professional interpretations or recommendations, to the value system of the family.

In both pre-service and in-service teacher training, collaborative skills must be a priority. Professors should infuse learning activities which allow students to reflect on and experience collaborative tasks. Lockhorst, Admiraal, and Pilot (2010) state that one way to include reflection-oriented, collaborative learning tasks is through the utilization of technology and structured tasks which require critical reflection on personal experiences and perspectives. Alternately, Shockley, Bond, and Rollins (2008) stress the importance of community building, individualization, and developing a sense of agency in teachers by fostering teachers' identity development, voice experimentation, and perspective-taking. They

incorporated arts integration, reflective practice, critical reflection, and teacher research to foster the transformation of teachers' hidden inner curriculum. Hidden inner curriculum is defined as a teacher's own unique culture, schema, knowledge, experiences, and perspectives which all equally affect who students actually become in the classroom. Cultural factors are important determinants of the diverse frames of reference that come about as a result of one's positionality (Delpit, 1995; Hale-Benson, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Due to the lack of one universal definition, Arts Integration can best be understood by the following three categories: arts integration as learning *through* and *with* the arts; arts integration as a curricular connection process; and arts integration as a collaborative engagement (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, & McLaughlin, 2007). To further synthesize the three categories, Arts Integration can be understood as a curricular connection process that collaboratively engages all learners to promote learning *through* and *with* the arts (Robinson, 2011). Bresler (1995) proposed four styles of integrating the arts into the classroom setting: the subservient integration approach, the co-equal cognitive integration approach, the affective integration approach, and the social integration approach. Educators who use the arts as an *extra* for their curriculum (a quick arts activity as a filler for a particular content area) are utilizing the subservient approach. When the arts are integrated with other aspects of the curriculum and students are required to use higher order thinking skills and aesthetic qualities to gain further understandings of a particular academic concept, teachers are utilizing the co-equal cognitive integration approach. In the affective approach, students are immersed in the arts through background music, reactions to music and art pieces, and the arts as self-expression; here the arts are used as a complement to the curriculum. The social integration approach is performance based and is used to increase parental participation through school plays and other performances (Gullatt, 2008).

Using creativity and collaboration, I was able to facilitate a multi-university/agency grant, which developed an innovative Master's level program in

arts integration for practicing teachers of various levels and disciplines that embraced diversity in higher education. Not only was collaboration utilized to network and obtain the grant, but it was also prioritized in the design of the master's program by incorporating critical reflection, task-related communication, collaborative tasks, technology, community building, arts integration, and teacher research.

## Creativity: Innovation is Driven Out of Need

Innovation is often driven out of need. My teaching experience, in the K-12 public school and in the university setting, fostered my awareness of the need for professional collaboration, which ignited my creativity. These experiences developed resiliency which Patterson, Collins, and Abbott (2004) define as "using energy productively to achieve school goals in the face of adversity" (p.3). According to Patterson et al. (2004) resilient teachers act from a set of values that guides their professional decision making; highly value professional development and find ways to get what they need, often outside the school district; provide mentoring to others; and stay focused on students and their learning.

I began in the field of special education eighteen years ago in 1993. After growing up in the southern region of the USA as part of the majority culture, I moved to Miami and experienced a culture shock as I realized what it was like to now be a part of a minority culture. During my Educational Specialist degree (Ed.S.) program at the University of Miami, I became exposed to the theory of cultural reciprocity. Shortly there after, I eagerly embraced this in my personal and professional life as I had discovered the challenges that one can face as a member of a minority culture when working with my colleagues, students, and parents. Applying the theories previously mentioned, I significantly improved my ability to collaborate with colleagues and parents and to foster a climate of celebrating cultural differences throughout my fourteen years teaching students with behavior disorders and autism.

During the last five years of my K-12 teaching career, teaching high school students with autism, I began to experience the power of the arts in creating an inclusive environment. Within an inclusive, co-taught performing arts class, students, with and without a variety of disabilities, formed friendships and respect for each other as they developed skills in singing, acting, and dancing and rehearsed for their two annual performances. Observing the dramatic improvements in my students' social skills, self-efficacy, and overall school experience sparked a fire in my heart to passionately advocate for art integration as a vehicle to foster inclusive environments that provide emotionally supportive collaborations and cooperation which can motivate students to learn.

My experiences teaching and mentoring new teachers in the K-12 public schools, for 14 years, provided numerous instances where I witnessed how the lack of collaboration between general and special educators caused detrimental effects on the progress of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities need to generalize newly learned skills, both academic and social, in all environments in order to truly master the skill. To accomplish this, their individualized goals and objectives should be integrated into the learning experiences throughout their school day. Furthermore, general educators must be aware of the accommodations they are allowed. This requires constant communication between the special educator and the general educators in order to effectively monitor progress of the student. Seeing how often there was a lack of collaboration occurring, convinced me that there needed to be more of an emphasis on developing collaborative skills for pre-service and in-service professional development of teachers.

When I moved into higher education five years ago, I noticed that there was a lack of collaborative professional development for general educators and special educators within the college of education. There was little collaboration between the professors teaching the courses for general educators and the professors teaching the courses for special educators in course development, course content, or co-teaching. Furthermore, there was also a lack of interdisciplinary collaborations between

the departments and colleges across the university. Being a novice faculty member I learned quickly that without additional funding, achieving this change would be difficult. I decided to look into obtaining a grant to fund my endeavors. Because I was at a very small private University, the resources used to support faculty in grant pursuits were sparse. However, this did not deter me; I remained committed to the value of interdisciplinary professional development for teachers and the impact this would have on students and their learning! My resiliency led me to look outside of my University for ways to collaborate and obtain the necessary funding.

## Collaboration: Essential for Creativity

A few months later, I attended a grant writing workshop held by the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF), where I approached the ICUF interagency affairs consultant with my grant idea. I followed up with the ICUF consultant two months later and began to collaborate with ICUF, who manifested a network with seven other universities/colleges and educational agencies and successfully wrote the Untie the Right Brain (UTRB) collaborative grant. Over one hundred and seventy-five teachers from public schools of high needs districts across Florida, with a few teachers from private schools, participated in either professional development or an M.Ed. Program, follow up art boost sessions, a statewide arts integration conference, and served as "art coaches" in their schools to mentor other teachers and create interdisciplinary and interagency collaborations to support their arts integration efforts. The art boost sessions were sessions designed to follow up with teachers during the school year to problem solve any issues they were having as art coaches in their school, share their own arts integration efforts, and strengthen collaborations with administration by inviting them to attend.

Creativity and collaboration remained the forefront of developing the four different programs at each of the participating universities/colleges, in order to meet the diverse needs of the over one hundred and seventy-five teachers who were recruited from across

urban, suburban, and rural districts throughout Florida. Through this program, two of the colleges developed professional development courses and two of the universities developed graduate degree programs all preparing teachers to integrate the arts into their classrooms and to become a coach for other teachers wishing to do the same. For my graduate program, I developed collaborations with the Florida Learning Alliance, the Heartland Educational Consortium, and the North East Florida Educational Consortium, in an effort to recruit teachers throughout multiple geographical areas in Florida for my M.Ed. program. Since my program was tasked in the training of teachers from schools spread throughout the largest geographical areas, I had to be creative and design a hybrid program with online courses offered during the school year, and with the arts integration core courses offered as one week intensive courses on campus during the summer. In addition, since the teachers were geographically spread out, I had to arrange two other locations in addition to my campus, to hold the follow up art boost sessions during the regular school year. My willingness to be flexible, in terms of location, was important because the art boost sessions were a critical component of the program which allowed the teachers to build collaborations with their administrators and address challenges faced by the teachers in their “art coach” role, to lead in arts integration efforts school wide.

Since there was not enough time to get a new program passed by the various committees before the program would need to begin, I utilized an existing M.Ed. online program in teaching and learning and created a concentration area by removing six of the teaching and learning courses and adding six arts integration courses, including one course that introduced arts integration, one course in using arts integration with diverse populations (PBS and Differentiated Instruction), and one course in each of the four art disciplines. In order to develop a strong interdisciplinary program, I collaborated with professors from the College of Arts and Sciences at my University to create co-developed courses, which integrated both art content and educational pedagogy into four art content specific courses with cumulative projects that would build throughout the courses and

program. We met as a group several times and then I met with each art content professor individually to develop truly integrated courses that emphasized both the art content and the educational pedagogy teachers needed to create lessons, unit plans, locate resources, incorporate standards, and accommodate students with academic and behavioral challenges. The course content in the six concentration courses was designed to be flexible to meet the needs of the diverse teachers in the program: general educators, special educators, art teachers, music teachers, drama teachers, secondary subject specific teachers, and various grade levels (K-12). In addition, I infused the principles of developing a posture of cultural reciprocity into course content through the course assignments and the mentoring requirements of serving as an “art coach”, which also developed a teacher’s sense of agency as a teacher. As an “art coach” the teachers were expected to build a collaboration of other teachers, arts specialists, artists in their communities, administrators, district personnel, and agency contacts in order to be effective in their arts integration efforts in the various schools and districts throughout Florida. Also, the teachers were required to keep logs of their own arts integration implementation and of their role as art coaches to foster critical reflection. Teachers also performed research in several of their classes, on arts integration, and conducted action research in their own classes. In all aspects of the program content and delivery, the development of creativity and collaboration was emphasized at all levels.

## Conclusion

Analyzing the data collected from the teacher narratives, classes, focus group art boost sessions, and interdisciplinary meetings at my university, some themes emerged. First, arts integration seemed to create classroom climates where struggling learners became actively involved and were surpassing teacher expectations. Second, the students were demonstrating more collaborative and cooperative skills and this created a more positive classroom climate. Third, teachers emphasized more creativity



and critical thinking skills in their arts integrated units they designed and reported the fun that they experienced in creating them and teaching them. Fourth, teachers' leadership and collaborative skills grew as they became the arts integration coaches in their schools and began to collaborate to problem solve and overcome barriers that each faced in very diverse schools and districts. Fifth, internal collaborations began to occur at the university level as other colleges in the university began to examine how the College of Education and the College of Arts and Sciences had collaborated together to create the first truly interdisciplinary degree program at the university. Conversations occurred around funding of interdisciplinary programs, course development and compensation for faculty, and creating co-teaching and other collaborative teaching opportunities and options for faculty compensation. Finally, a model was created of how external collaborations could allow several small private universities to coordinate together and with multiple school districts, educational agencies, and with the Florida division of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities to develop and be awarded a competitive grant to create interdisciplinary programs.

In this time of economic uncertainties, it is now more important than ever for universities and colleges to become creative and emphasize interdisciplinary collaborative efforts both internally and externally in order to develop cost-effective, innovative programs in higher education that embrace diversity. If innovation is driven out of need, then institutions must tap into their creativity to become innovative in reaching diverse cultures. Collaboration facilitates creativity. In order to develop effective collaborations in such a diverse society, one must develop cultural awareness at the subtle level. Practicing the guidelines of cultural reciprocity in collaborations will facilitate a subtle level of cultural awareness. Incorporating creativity and collaboration into program development and teaching methodologies will allow teaching professionals, on every level, to include more students from diverse cultures and prepare them to be creative thinkers and collaborators in a global society.

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## Biography

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